

そうめん *Sōmen* Noodles

BUYING & STORING *sōmen* noodles:

Japanese *sōmen*, ultra-thin wheat noodles, are sold as *kan men* (dried noodles), and typically in band-tied, pre-measured bundles. Each bundle, called *taba* in Japanese, is about 50 grams (1.7 ounces).

Store *sōmen* noodles as you would any dried pasta: on a cool, dark, dry shelf. Once opened, transfer any unused contents to a lidded glass jar, canister, or sealed bag (if there was a packet of drying agent that came in the original package include that in your storage container). Though spoilage is rare even a year later, it's best to label with the date the package was opened, and use within a few months.



Most Japanese consider 1 bundle to be a single portion, though I usually count on 3 bundles to feed 2 (reasonably hungry) people. In its dried form, each 50-gram bundle of *sōmen* is 178 calories. When cooked the same bundle's calorie count is reduced to 171; some of the sesame oil (used to stretch the dough as the noodles are made) dissipates as they cook in boiling water.

COOKING *sōmen* noodles:

You want your noodles to be firm but with no hard core; what Italians call *al dente* or the Japanese call *koshi* ("substance"). To achieve this, *sōmen* are traditionally cooked using a special technique called *bikkuri mizu* ("surprise water") or *sashi mizu* ("adding extra water"). The same method works very well with any thin noodle, such as vermicelli.

Use a deep pot. A pot that has a tight-fitting lid will be more fuel-efficient (water in a lidded pot will come to a boil faster). The lid will also trap heat in the pot after cooking, if the noodles need a bit more time to become tender at the core. Always allow at least 2 inches headroom (the distance between the rim of the pot and the water level), when cooking *sōmen* by the surprise-water method (to avoid a "surprise" overflow!).

Most noodle packages will provide a suggested cooking time. You can use that as an ESTIMATED TIME from start to finish but because there are so many variables (the size of your pot, the strength of your stove's heat, the number of portions of noodles you will be cooking at the same time) I suggest you use **OBSERVATION to gauge time** instead.



Bring a large pot of water to a vigorous boil. Add the noodles, scattering them like pick-up-sticks. As the water in the pot returns to a boil, stir the noodles. Add your *bikkuri mizu* to break the boil back to a gentle simmer.

When the water in the pot returns to a boil again, test for doneness. Lift a few noodle strands from the pot, dip them in a separate bowl of cold water and taste.

If the noodles seem too firm, EITHER cook for an additional 30 seconds OR cut the heat source and cover the pot for one minute. Either way, IMMEDIATELY scoop-out the noodles with a strainer or skimmer. Or, if using a pot with a pasta insert (be sure it is a fine-meshed insert when cooking thread-thin *sōmen*), lift the insert from the pot, leaving the boiling water behind in the pot.

RINSING cooked *sōmen* noodles:

Surprising as it may sound, rinsing freshly cooked noodles—all types of noodles—in cold water is common Japanese kitchen practice. It removes surface starch so the noodles won't be gummy. Having a shower setting on your kitchen faucet is helpful: it rinses and cools the noodles quickly without excessive pressure. Use your hands, too to gently lift and “massage” the noodles to insure even exposure to the shower of cooling rinse water.



Once cooled down, drain the noodles well.

Later, if the rinsed noodles will be used in a hot dish, they can be dipped briefly in boiling water, and the bowls can be warmed-up with boiling water, too.

Similarly, rinse precooked noodles intended for chilled dishes in cold water just before draining them a final time and serving them.

When serving more than 2 or 3 people at once, I often precook several packages of *sōmen* noodles and shape them into swirled bundles. After rinsing and draining the cooked noodles I return them to a bowl and pour in just enough icy cold water to have the cluster of noodles loosen a bit. Using a blunt-pronged fork (or 2 or 3 chopsticks), twist into bundles. As you twist, let excess water drip back into the bowl.

